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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The War and Thieu's Political Position

NOTE

In the following pages, we offer our view of Thieu's political prospects over the next four or five months. We focus essentially on possible changes in the situation on the battlefield, including related military, political, and psychological developments in both Vietnams. We explore the political implications of ARVN defeat, ARVN victory, and a military stalemate. We have not attempted to develop scenarios linked to alternative US military/political postures. We assume the continuation -- at one level or another -- of the US "blockade" and the bombing of the North, and continued unwillingness in Moscow or Peking to apply the kind of pressure on Hanoi that might compel the North Vietnamese to quit the field in the South.

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Elements of Thieu's Political Strength

1. Through the various formulations of the communist proposals for a settlement of the war, one condition has remained constant -- the removal of Nguyen Van Thieu and his political apparatus. Hanoi's assertion that Thieu stands between South Vietnam and peace has not struck a noticeably responsive chord in South Vietnam, however, and Thieu's political position has remained remarkably solid over the past few years. Most of what remains of Thieu's domestic opposition has been in obvious disarray, incapable of offering a serious challenge to his control. Non-communist opposition groups have lacked the unity and leadership to present an effective coalition of anti-Thieu forces, while communist capacities for effective political action against the central government have been relatively slight since the 1968 Tet offensive.

2. The An Quang Buddhists have remained an exception to the general political impotence of opposition groups in South Vietnam, mainly because of their impressive political organization in the northern provinces of South Vietnam.

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An Quang alone, of course, has never had the political muscle to overturn the government in Saigon, but it has had the capacity to stimulate serious civil disorder, as in 1966. Church leadership has generally avoided this kind of disruption in recent years, however, and has sought to strengthen its influence by working within the political system rather than taking to the streets. An Quang leaders have little love for Thieu, but generally have come to look upon him as more acceptable than the unpredictable Ky or the ineffectual Minh (though local bonzes and laymen did support Minh's abortive presidential candidacy).

3. Obviously, Thieu's power has not been based on his broad popular or political appeal; it rests heavily on his control of the governmental bureaucracy — most importantly — on the continuing support of the senior military establishment. Thieu has always shown great skill at surviving the shifting fortunes of military politics; since his election in 1967, he has maneuvered officers loyal to him into most of the senior commands while isolating those associated with ~~Nguyen~~ Cao Ky, his predecessor. Indeed,

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there does not now seem to be any senior ARVN officer who could generate enough support among his colleagues to challenge Thieu's leadership.

4. Other factors have reinforced Thieu's position. The most significant has been the firm backing of the US Government, whose well-known opposition to further coups in South Vietnam has been decisive in dissuading would-be plotters. The military's physical and psychological dependence on American military assistance has made them extremely sensitive to this kind of pressure from Washington. There is also a genuine awareness among the generals -- and among most politically conscious Vietnamese as well -- of the advantages of political stability over the merry-go-round of coups and civil disorders that characterized the 1963-1966¹⁵ period.

Politics and the Changing Military Situation

5. In the final analysis, Thieu's political survival is (and always has been) linked with South Vietnam's prospects on the battlefield. The current enemy offensive has had an unsettling effect on the political situation in

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Saigon. When the loss of Quang Tri hit home, public confidence in the government and its forces was quite obviously shaken. Criticism of Thieu's leadership -- though muted -- began to percolate, not only among his political opponents but among some senior elements of the military as well. General Minh's supporters initiated a good deal of the grumbling in the background. And in late April, Senator Vu Van Mau, leader of the opposition Buddhist bloc in the Senate, introduced a resolution demanding that Hanoi withdraw its troops to cover a parallel request that Thieu institute sweeping reforms. Some senior officers, including members of the Joint General Staff, have become more vocal in criticizing Thieu's policy of selecting commanders for their personal loyalty rather than professional competence.

6. The solidity of American support has also been called into question. As on the occasion of earlier military setbacks, there are rumors in South Vietnam of connivance between Washington and Hanoi ... or Peking... or Moscow, helped along by the Vietnamese tendency to believe in conspiracies. There is also much open discussion of alleged great-power understandings to end the war, even at the

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expense of Vietnamese interests. Such speculations reflect the search for scapegoats for ARVN failures since 1 April; they are also in part a spin-off from the disclosure of the secret US-North Vietnamese talks in Paris and the recent US Presidential visits to Peking and Moscow. But the prevalence of such attitudes points up the basic sense of insecurity that has always weakened the resolve and capabilities of the South Vietnamese in their confrontation with Hanoi. The expanded US air and naval effort against the North in recent weeks has been reassuring to the South Vietnamese, but it is obvious that the strength of Thieu's political position will remain highly sensitive to the course of the current military campaign which may well extend into the fall months.

7. *Defeat or Victory: The "Easy" Estimates.* If ARVN can stop the current North Vietnamese thrust on all major fronts, and proceed at some early date to edge Hanoi's divisions back toward their frontier redoubts, Thieu's political position would be greatly strengthened. He could not easily be dislodged by his opponents in Saigon.

8. Thieu's political problems would not be over, however. While Thieu would be in a strong position to cope with elements opposed to his continuation in office, he could not

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count on ARVN's successes eliminating all domestic sentiment for his political scalp. Even with the imminent communist threat removed -- the Saigon political scene is likely to be churning with peace talk, most of it involving Thieu's removal from the scene. The US presidential campaign alone would be sufficient to set this rumor mill in motion. But it will also be fed by persisting war weariness among Southerners (and a widespread assumption that Hanoi shared the feeling).

9. Not that An Quang or other civilian politicians would want to hand the country over to the communists; on the contrary, the feeling might prevail that having set Hanoi back rather decisively -- albeit with US help -- South Vietnam had for the first time achieved a solid bargaining position for the inevitable political negotiation with Hanoi. And Thieu himself, as an obvious barrier to any settlement, might seem more expendable than before in their eyes. In such circumstances, however, Thieu could undoubtedly count on the support of his generals, who could not easily be persuaded to abandon a winning hand, unless they came to believe that the US itself was ready to shift away from Thieu.

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10. At the other end of the military spectrum -- if ARVN simply collapses in the field in the face of a renewed onslaught, Thieu's leadership position would collapse with it. The public mood in the South would quickly turn to a search for any form of accommodation that offered a chance of personal survival. Those in the government and the army with the means would undoubtedly try to leave the country. Further American support of the war would appear futile to most South Vietnamese; and they would anticipate heavy pressures in the US for any kind of a settlement with Hanoi that seemed to guarantee the release of US prisoners. With ARVN in disarray and the people disheartened, Thieu would be exceedingly vulnerable to any move by a political grouping in Saigon that represented itself as ready, willing, and able to negotiate an end to the fighting.

11. Even short of this sort of total collapse, ARVN's will to continue the fight could be shaken decisively by some major military setback, even if ARVN itself were left largely intact and still in control of most of the country and its people. The loss of Hue, in particular, would be a tremendous shock, not so much because of its military value (Danang has more), but because it would signify the failure of the best fighting units in the South -- ARVN's First

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Division and the Marines, as well as Ranger and Airborne elements -- in addition to the loss of Vietnam's "imperial" city. Such a defeat could have an unravelling effect on the cohesion and will of the rest of the ARVN. The rank and file of the army would be increasingly vulnerable to communist propaganda and proselytizing efforts, which have already had an impact on the relatively exposed People's Self Defense Forces -- the local militia. The regular troops, so far at least, have been largely unreceptive to recent communist offers of leniency to those who defect or desert. But if ARVN's elite forces go down in defeat at Hue, defection and desertion might quickly develop widespread appeal among troops elsewhere in South Vietnam. In any case, Thieu's leadership position would become almost untenable.

12. *Prolonged Stalemate.* Political forecasting becomes more difficult in situations where neither side succeeds in gaining a decisive battlefield position in the months ahead. Yet this now appears as a likely outcome of the current military campaign.

13. If ARVN is able to hold essentially its present positions against Hanoi's forces but shows little promise by this fall of restoring the situation to its status of last

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March, there is likely to be considerable pessimism in South Vietnam over longer-term prospects. A substantial North Vietnamese Army will have secured major lodgements in South Vietnam, increasing the chance of another round of heavy fighting next year in the same critical areas. Thieu's position, in this situation, will be determined by the same factors that have been operable since 1967 -- the attitudes of top ARVN leaders, which as before will hinge largely on assurances of continuing American support and the course of events on the battlefield.

14. In a situation of military stalemate, with the communists still in a threatening position, domestic politics will no doubt continue to be restrained, notwithstanding persistent criticism of Thieu's leadership. None of the major opposition groups have shown signs of adopting a pacifist posture; just the opposite, An Quang, for example, has continued to express the view that compromise with Hanoi is impossible. And Catholic groups, though upset by Thieu's current bid for unlimited powers, are not inclined to support major concessions to the communist side. Various political blocs, normally at each other's throat, are attempting to work together to provide refugee relief and generally to present a united front to the communists.

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15. However, Thieu shows no serious inclination to seize the opportunity offered by the current wave of anti-communist patriotism to bring opposition figures into the government and create at least the impression of greater political unity in the South. There was speculation earlier that members of the An Quang-associated bloc would be offered some larger political role, but Thieu has since withdrawn into his customary aloofness from the civilian politicians and from the ad hoc groups trying to generate public esprit. He has been unresponsive as well to efforts of non-political figures, in Hue for example, to organize the populace in support of the war effort. Thieu's failure to woo the politicians has already led to trouble with the Senate over legislation for emergency powers, and no doubt will continue to evoke the criticism that Thieu cannot "unite" the nation and does not truly represent the South Vietnamese people.

16. The support of the military remains the *sine qua non* of any move to replace him. For all their dislike and distrust of Thieu, none of the political factions seem capable or willing to move to bring him down. And so long as ARVN seems able to stand up to the North Vietnamese on the ground,

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there is little chance of any senior commander opting for other than the hard anti-communist line identified with Thieu. The determination of the generals to resist a compromise settlement will certainly be influenced by their view of conditions in North Vietnam, however. If they come to believe that the US "blockade" and air strikes are in fact substantially curtailing foreign assistance to North Vietnam, they will probably anticipate an end to large-scale territorial warfare and a return to "protracted" warfare on the patterns of 1970-1971, and hence see little reason to abandon Thieu. On the other hand, should these US measures be abandoned soon or prove ineffective, and the South Vietnamese military thought they faced another round of massive artillery and armor assaults in 1973, their attitudes would be less sanguine, their support of Thieu less certain.

17. Nonetheless, the generals are not going to abandon Thieu unless they feel that Washington looks upon him as a liability in its negotiations with Hanoi. Most military leaders, like virtually all South Vietnamese, feel that the war must eventually be settled by the powers, with South Vietnam's fate basically in the hands of the US. Thus, they will certainly remain very sensitive to any hint that

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American support for Thieu is wavering, and very receptive to rumors of secret arrangements between the US and the communist side. As noted earlier, the US presidential campaign, of itself, is certain to arouse South Vietnamese fears of a major shift in US policy in Indochina. And then there is the prospect of a continuing US drawdown through the summer of its remaining troop complement in the South.

18. In a stalemated situation, Hanoi is sure to continue its persistent effort to exploit Thieu's image as an uncompromising hawk and, on the other hand, to arouse South Vietnamese fears of abandonment by the US. The communists are already trying to make contact with senior ARVN officers and notable political and religious figures. Big Minh has admitted approaches from communists, and An Quang leader Thich Tri Quang recently refused a proposal to meet with communist officials near Saigon. While such approaches have apparently been unsuccessful in the past, the argument for accommodation would grow stronger if there were prospects of further, massive assaults, and if the chances for continuing American assistance seemed to grow more questionable.

19. Indeed, if ARVN seemed to be bogged down, unable to regain the initiative, and if American patience and support appeared to be wearing thin, Thieu himself might feel

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pressed to try for an accommodation with Hanoi. He has occasionally shown willingness to consider political compromises and he is not unrealistic. Hanoi's attitude would be controlling in this situation, however, and Hanoi has remained adamant on Thieu's removal, though refusing to indicate with any degree of clarity who among the southern elite might be acceptable in a coalition government.

20. Hanoi's rigid posture clearly works against an early end to the war, even one not necessarily unfavorable to communist political objectives. One can only assume that Hanoi requires: (1) the "face" that would attend achievement of its more ambitious demands; and/or (2) the absolute certainty to be derived from a clean sweep of all experienced non-communist leaders in the South. North Vietnam's apparent insistence that not only Thieu, but the entire establishment that now runs South Vietnam must go, does not hold out much hope to the South Vietnamese that any other notable figure now on the Saigon political scene would be any more acceptable to the North Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese politicians seem to have little choice but to go on as they are, as long as the army is willing to fight, hoping that international pressures will somehow force restraints on Hanoi's actions and demands.

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21. Were Hanoi to modify its stand, however, and somehow to indicate a way in which the GVN -- without Thieu -- could arrange a settlement (rather than a capitulation), domestic pressures for his resignation would grow rapidly, particularly if the US showed interest in the offer. Minh remains the most obvious figure to lead a new combination in Saigon. Although his leadership abilities are dubious, he still commands respect among the Buddhists, among native Vietnamese of the Delta, and in the military; and he has indicated a willingness to permit the Viet Cong "a political role" in South Vietnam, in contrast to Thieu's negative response on the subject. Unless Saigon's military prospects looked dismal, however, ARVN leadership would accept Minh only at Washington's insistence -- though he would be more tolerable to them than any of the civilian politicians on the scene. He would certainly be more tolerable to Hanoi than any of his fellow ARVN generals.

* * *

22. *In sum*, if ARVN acquits itself reasonably well over the next several months, President Thieu will retain the domestic political assets that have buttressed his leadership position in Saigon for the past several years, most particularly the support of the top military. But ARVN

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performance, however solid, cannot provide him with immunity to persistent opposition harassment, even on basic issues. The past 60 days, though costly to Hanoi, have demonstrated the limitations of the ARVN force (and the virtual indispensability of US air support to its operations), and the fragility of the government position in the countryside. In addition, the increased military demands on the US -- coupled with anticipation of the American presidential campaign -- has intensified concerns in Saigon of a settlement reached over South Vietnamese heads.

23. Such liabilities are balanced to some degree by the firm US posture vis-a-vis the North at this time; and might be further offset if it should become clear that US tactics would succeed in greatly reducing North Vietnamese capabilities to initiate large-scale attacks next year. Nonetheless, even the staunchest anti-communist elements in the south are war-weary and see little prospect that GVN forces, even with heavy US air support, can compel the communists to cease military activity in the South at any time soon. In such a milieu, Thieu's position could become increasingly vulnerable.

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